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A Bodyguard of Lies

Revelations of a 'disinformation' campaign damage the credibility of the Reagan White House

In 1965 Americans were introduced to a new word: *dezinformatsiya*, or "disinformation." It was reported that six years earlier the Soviet Union had established a Kremlin department dedicated to spreading false information abroad for political ends. Since then, Soviet disinformation campaigns have stirred trouble around the world and provided constant reminders of the cynical and duplicitous nature of the Soviet regime. The U.S. government, of course, has also been known to distort, mislead, bluff and manipulate, but it has rarely been caught pursuing an elaborate, multipronged policy of coordinated lying. Last week, though, the Reagan administration was reported to have mimicked the Soviet approach. In an article in *The Washington Post*, Bob Woodward revealed that in August national-security adviser John Poindexter sent President Reagan a memo outlining what Poindexter called a "disinformation program" aimed at destabilizing Libyan leader Muammar Kaddafi by generating false reports that the United States and Libya were again on a collision course.

While reporters independently confirmed the memo—and a presidential directive approving it—Reagan painted himself into a corner by denying any disinformation campaign and challenging

"the veracity of that entire [Washington Post] story." Crossing signals with his boss, Secretary of State George Shultz, in New York for meetings at the United Nations, tried to justify the deception. He quoted Winston Churchill in World War II as having said, "In time of war, the truth is so precious it must be attended by a bodyguard of lies." The Reagan administration, he said, was "pretty darn close" to being at war with Libya.

It was even closer to being at war with journalists. "This administration has con-

tempt for the press, from the top right on down," says Jack Nelson, Washington bureau chief for the *Los Angeles Times*. "Even the Nixon administration, as closed as it was, didn't treat the press as poorly." Besides severely limited access to the presi-

dent and his aides and "managing" news much more thoroughly than earlier administrations, the White House has become obsessive about leaks. CIA director William Casey has been particularly outspoken, and even as the Libya story unfolded last week, the FBI was gearing up a newly created special unit to find leakers. The twin offensive made it seem that the administration believed the press should be punished for reporting the inconvenient truth and rewarded for reporting convenient lies. As if to confirm the press's worst suspicions, the administration asked the FBI unit to try to find out who had leaked Poindexter's memo to Woodward.

The three-page memo outlined an elaborate disinformation strategy, though it seems the prime instruments were meant to be Kaddafi agents and the foreign media rather than the American press. Poindexter argued that U.S. policy should be aimed at "making Kaddafi think that there is a high degree of internal opposition to him within Libya, that his key trusted aides are disloyal, that the U.S. is about to move against him militarily." Evidence that the disinformation campaign was under way first turned up on Aug. 25 in *The Wall Street Journal*. While Poindexter was reporting pri-

vately in mid-August that Kaddafi was temporarily "quiescent," the *Journal's* John Walcott and Gerald F. Seib wrote that Kaddafi was planning more terrorism, that the United States and Libya were on a "collision course" and that as a follow-up to the April bombing raid, "the Reagan administration is preparing to teach the mercurial leader another lesson." Many other reporters, pressed by their editors for a story during a slow news month, scrambled to match the *Journal* story, which White House spokesman Larry Speakes curiously described as "unauthorized but highly authoritative." Within a couple of days other aides quietly backed away from it, leading some news organizations to challenge the *Journal* account.

False thrust? Even though the overall thrust of the story appeared false, the *Journal* stuck to the part that suggested the U.S. government believed the Libyans had stepped up their support of terrorism. "This was an incredibly well-sourced story," says Albert Hunt, the *Journal's* Washington bureau chief. But the paper admits it was "misled" about the likelihood of another military strike against Libya. "We relied on high-level officials who hyped some of this," Hunt says. Among the sources, according to some White House aides, was Howard Teicher, a strong-minded Poindexter deputy (page 46).

The *Journal* may have also been the victim of what former CIA director William Colby once called "blowback." In 1976 the Church Committee, set up to investigate the CIA, determined that stories planted by the agency abroad sometimes ended up back in the U.S. media, where they were believed by an unsuspecting public. In the '50s and '60s, according to the Church Com-

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The case for lying: Casey, Shultz

mittee, more than 30 American newspapers subscribed to two foreign news services that were, in fact, CIA fronts. Similarly, on the Libya story, the usual double standard—disinformation is acceptable abroad but not at home—broke down. The White House apparently did nothing to throw Walcott and Seib off the phony scent. In August *Newsweek* learned that when Pointdexter was asked about the Journal story he said the leak was unauthorized but added, "We aren't troubled by it because this serves a useful purpose by providing a warning to Kaddafi." Reagan nodded in agreement and said, "That's fine."

The way Shultz frames it, the disinformation issue is a simple matter of the ends (in this case rattling Kaddafi, a confirmed terrorist) justifying the means (lying to the press and thereby to the American people). But even within the administration there was strong disagreement over the ends themselves. Woodward's source for the memo, in all likelihood, was an official who believed that spooking Kaddafi would do more harm than good, possibly inciting the

Libyan leader to further acts of terrorism. And the means—the lies—were profoundly disturbing, even to journalists hardened by a lifetime of covering dissembling officials. "We should leave that garbage to the Russians," says A. M. Rosenthal, executive editor of *The New York Times*. Sen. William Cohen argues that the disinformation campaign reflects a strange pathology in superpower relations. "It appears that there are some people over there [in the White House] who think we have to emulate the Soviet Union in order to compete with them."

Dissemination: Some of the lying is not emulation, but simply business as usual in government. The Eisenhower administration lied about the downing of U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers, the Kennedy administration lied about the Bay of Pigs, the Johnson administration lied about Vietnam (the "credibility gap"), the Nixon administration lied about Watergate, the Carter administration lied about the Iranian hostage raid. The lies are often about the president's health: Eisenhower's heart attack was called a "chill" at first; Nancy Reagan ordered aides not to disclose information about her husband's cancerous nose pimple. Other times they involve niceties. After he won a hard-fought 1981 vote for selling AWACS planes to Saudi Arabia, Reagan was reported by his aide Michael Deaver to have said a heartfelt, "Thank God." What Reagan really said was, "I feel like I've just crapped a pineapple."

Is lying on minor matters or to protect the secrecy of a military operation different than launching a disinformation campaign? Many journalists answer yes. In the case of imminent military operations, where the element of surprise is essential and lives are at stake, the deceptions are often unavoidable—though as Anthony Marro, managing editor of *Newsday*, puts it, "These situations should be so rare that case studies are written about them." Using the press as part of psychological warfare is viewed in a separate matter. "Lying to the press goes back to the beginning of the republic, but this kind of institutional lying dates mostly from the origins of the

cold war and covert activities," says author David Wise. "It used to be that policies were framed to fit events; now events are shaped and manipulated to fit policies."

But because governments have rarely seen truth as their first duty, some blamed reporters for not being more wary of their sources. "What shocks me about this is the credulity of the press," says Hodding Carter, who served in the Carter administration. Sen. David Durenberger noted that "all the scrambling for scoops makes you susceptible to anyone bent on planting a story." And it's much easier to plant stories when the press relies so heavily on high-

ranking anonymous informants, many of whom ensnare reporters with promises of access and play-by-play insider detail. The *Wall Street Journal* article alone contained 42 uses of "sources say," "officials say" and other variations. Such sourcing is often unavoidable in Washington stories, and that in itself should compel a greater degree of skepticism.

Should the government be blamed for simply making use of what Shultz calls the "predictable tendencies" of the press? Even on a practical plane well below morality and the Constitution, the answer would seem to be yes. The next time the administration pits its word against that of critics or another nation, its believability will have been diminished. On the eve of the summit, it also inspires reflection on the differences between the United States and the Soviet Union. Americans grow up convinced that their values are different and more enlightened, but when "disinformation" ceases to be merely a Russian word, the distinctions begin to blur, and a deeply disturbing impression is conveyed to the rest of the world.

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